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Little heat for 'no' vote on pledge Reps. Stark, Honda opposed resolution to reverse court's decision

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When Rep. Barbara Lee stood alone last September in voting against waging war on international terrorism, the Berkeley Democrat found herself in a firestorm of criticism calling into question her patriotism.

When Bay Area Reps. Mike Honda and Fortney "Pete" Stark cast two of the three votes Thursday against a resolution defending the Pledge of Allegiance, they elicited a more balanced response. Their patriotism was questioned by some constituents, but others praised their votes of conscience.

Honda, D-San Jose, and Stark, D-Fremont, were two of only three votes cast against House Resolution 459, which called upon the Court of Appeals in San Francisco to reverse its Wednesday ruling that the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance rendered it an infringement on religious freedom.

The resolution passed the House 416-3 and the Senate 99-0. The other dissenting vote was cast by Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va.

Stark's staff said about 40 calls came into his district and Washington, D. C., offices, evenly split in support and opposition to his vote.

A angrier reaction came in Honda's South Bay district from a predictable source. Republican leaders said Honda's vote against the resolution was another example of how he is "out of step" with his constituents.

"I think it will cause him problems," said Duf Sundheim, chairman of the influential Lincoln Club of Northern California, a Republican group that recruits and finances GOP candidates.

Honda said in an interview Friday that a majority of his constituents "will understand" the principles that guided his vote.

"I think a handful will be emotional about it. There's not much I can do about that. It's an emotional issue for many people," he said as he was preparing to board a plane to Las Vegas, where he was scheduled to deliver the keynote address to a national conference of the Japanese American Citizens League.

A spokeswoman said Honda's offices received about 75 phone calls -- heavy traffic, but not unusual -- since he cast his vote. About two-thirds of the calls have been in support of his

position, she said.

Honda said in a two-page statement that he believes constituents can distinguish between a vote on policy and a vote of conscience.

"This is one of the decisions where you don't test the wind. Some pretty basic principles apply here," Honda said.

The same thinking may apply for Lee, D-Oakland, who cast one of the 416 votes in support of the House resolution calling on the Ninth Circuit Court to reverse its own decision.

Lee announced her vote with a one-sentence news release that echoed the wording of the pledge: "I support the Pledge of Allegiance and hope that all the members of Congress who joined me in voting for (the resolution) will truly be committed to working for 'liberty and justice for all.' "

A Lee spokesman said about 40 phone calls came in to her district and Washington offices -- a typical amount for a controversial issue.

The spokesman described the comments as "pretty mixed."

Lee could not be reached for further comment, but a prominent constituent, Berkeley City Councilwoman Linda Maio said the vote for the resolution clearly was a "very personal thing" that was unlikely to elicit an angry response.

When Lee cast her vote in September against the war on terrorism, she said then that she was relying on "my moral compass, my conscience and my God for direction."

Maio described Lee as a "deeply religious person" closely associated with a prominent Baptist church in Oakland.

"I think people will understand she searched her conscience, as she did before," Maio said, referring to her vote on the pledge issue.

Throughout the Bay Area, congressional office staff said calls were coming in from constituents at a higher-than-usual rate, most of it evenly split between support and opposition for the court's decision.

Only in the offices of Reps. Ellen Tauscher, D-Walnut Creek, and Zoe Lofgren, D-San Jose, did officials report lopsided criticism of the court's decision.

Most people seemed to be reserving their most heated comments for the court itself.

The court's offices in San Francisco have been flooded with telephone calls and more than 1,300 e-mails that have been "generally negative" and "the most we've ever had," said spokesman David Madden.

"Mostly, they're pretty passionate in their writing, but civil in their tone," Madden said.

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